

Getting started with SoTL: Common challenges and how to address them

THE CHALLENGE:

HOW TO ADDRESS IT:

DEFINING RESEARCH QUESTION(S)

Big questions and big issues are hard to tackle and discern. They also tend to require more resources (i.e. time, funds) than most instructors can allocate.

Break down your big questions in smaller bits and start with the most relevant or impactful pieces. Remember, “interesting” is not a research question, your focus should be the understanding of a teaching/learning experience. Aim for questions for which it is possible to find responses through collectable data within a reasonable timeline.

ACKNOWLEDGING CONTEXT

In SoTL, context is everything! The singularities of your teaching situation will dictate what data you collect, how you do it and what you do with it.

While generalizability and transferability of findings is a tenet for (some) disciplinary research, inquiry into teaching and learning is different. Situating your work in context will allow your audience to gauge the extent to which your findings can inform their own teaching situation.

CHOOSING A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Inquiring into teaching and learning means researching behaviours, attitudes and perceptions. Some instructors possess disciplinary tools to do this while some don't.

Seek support from colleagues and experts if your SoTL work is pushing you beyond your expertise. There's room for quantitative and qualitative philosophies within SoTL. A solid research plan should not lose sight of the research questions or the context where the work will be done.

INTRODUCING RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

The teaching team and students are often busy with regular course requirements. Introducing extra activities related to your research program could be detrimental for all.

Maximize the use of existing course activities. Be mindful of the rhythm of your course when introducing a new task (e.g. a survey is likely to be ignored if launched immediately before or during an exam period). Finding harmony between the different elements and timing of course and data gathering activities will take you a long way!

COMMUNICATING FINDINGS

Considering the right outlet for your work can be daunting. Often SoTL work looks “unfinished” or “messy”.

A variety of dissemination venues are available: from peer reviewed journals to internal/local meetings and alternative outlets (e.g. social media). SoTL typically invites conversations with a growing community of practice and findings are rarely definite or fully transferable.